

FALL 1992

No. 123

MENCKENIANA

A QUARTERLY REVIEW

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THE AMERICAN MERCURY

BY VINCENT FITZPATRICK

During 1923, while he and the noted drama critic George Jean Nathan were still editing the *Smart Set*, Henry Louis Mencken gleefully anticipated the new monthly to be published the following January by Alfred A. Knopf. Mencken planned "a serious review—the gaudiest and damndest ever seen in the Republic."¹ Theodore Dreiser suggested several flashy titles. "What we need," Mencken explained to his old friend, "is something that looks highly respectable outwardly. The American Mercury is almost perfect for that purpose. What will go on inside the tent is another story. You will recall that the late P. T. Barnum got away with burlesque shows by calling them moral lectures."² During the next decade, Mencken would thrust his arms wide, gather in as much of America as possible, and make it all part of the show. Under his forceful hand, the *American Mercury* would provide rollicking, highly irreverent commentary upon the American scene. From 1924 to 1933, "Mencken" and the "Mercury" would become synonymous. This coupling would prove to be one of the magazine's greatest

strengths as well as a salient factor in its decline.

When the *American Mercury* was established, Mencken and Nathan were each given twenty-five shares of stock—the remaining one hundred were divided among Knopf, his wife, and his father—as well as full editorial control.³ The magazine was intended for the intelligent, solvent, urbane American who was skeptical about brummagem utopias and the yearning to save humanity. "The *American Mercury* will never have a million circulation," Mencken explained. "It is not headed in that direction. Its function is to depict America for the more enlightened sort of Americans—realistically, with good humor and wholly without cant. It is read wherever a civilized minority survives the assaults of the general herd of yawpers and come-ons. Its aim is to entertain that minority—and give it consolation."⁴ The *American Mercury* was called many things, a number of them vicious, but few called it dull.

¹ Mencken to Sara Haardt, 10 July 1923, in *The New Mencken Letters*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Dial, 1977), p. 170.

² Mencken to Theodore Dreiser, 10 September 1923, in *Letters of H. L. Mencken*, ed. Guy Forgue (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p. 260.

³ Alfred A. Knopf, "H. L. Mencken, George Jean Nathan, and the *American Mercury* Adventure," *Menckeniana* 78 (Summer 1981):5.

⁴ Mencken, "Postscript," in Earle Bachman et al., *Three Years 1924-1927: The Story of a New Idea and Its Successful Adaptation* (New York: American Mercury, 1927), pp. 35-36.

This article first appeared as a contribution to *American Literary Magazines: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Edward G. Chielens (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), and is reprinted with permission. Dr. Fitzpatrick presented the substance of the article in a talk given at the Mencken Society's spring meeting June 27, 1992 at Zion Lutheran Church, Baltimore.

Even fewer called it unattractive. As Mencken wished, the magazine's rambunctious content was sedately clothed by its respectable title and the distinctive Paris-green cover. The paper was expensive Scotch featherweight, and the Garamond type was set in double columns. There were no illustrations in each issue of 128 pages.⁵ Mencken had chafed under what he considered the ostentation of the *Smart Set*'s cover and the poor quality of its paper. With the *Mercury*, he had a magazine whose understated elegance set it apart from many of its competitors.

As he had done when he and Nathan were editing the *Smart Set*, Mencken continued to live in Baltimore and make periodic trips to New York City. Highly efficient, Mencken and Nathan decided to handle submissions as they had done earlier. If the first reader liked the manuscript, then he forwarded it to his colleague, whose approval was also necessary for a piece to be accepted. Disagreements were rare, and authors received a quick response to their material. Encouragement and incisive criticism accompanied many letters of rejection. This editorial courtesy, the prompt response and payment, and the prestige of appearing in the *Mercury* helped to atone for the magazine's low rate of pay: two cents per word for prose, and fifty cents per line for poetry.

During Mencken's editorship, the *Mercury* published William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Edgar Lee Masters.⁶ But the magazine was also enlivened by a number of writers not actively courted by other magazines. Con-

victs and hoboes and dishwashers wrote for Mencken, as did taxi drivers and businessmen, physicians and clergymen, lawyers and diplomats and outdoorsmen. The *Mercury* remained open to newspapermen as well as academic critics, and the eclectic nature of its contributors benefited the magazine.

The *Smart Set* had been primarily a magazine of fiction. But during his decade with the *Mercury*, Mencken's interest in fiction declined; he published less of it and reviewed it infrequently. The *Mercury*'s nonfiction, as well as some of its more celebrated features, tended to be satirical. In fact, more than one-third of the essays published between 1924 and 1929 lampooned some aspect of the American scene.⁷ Some of the more vulnerable targets were assaulted repeatedly: pedagogy, chiropractic, Christian Science, Prohibition, puritanism, the sad credulity of rural America.⁸ In "Americana," a feature continued from the *Smart Set*, the editors offered items gleaned from a variety of newspapers and magazines. Determined to prove the imbecility of the American mind, Mencken and Nathan did not lack material. For example, the *Mercury* recounted the story of the young man in Oregon who, believing that fasting would improve his health, died of starvation. And there was the sad tale of the wife who divorced her husband because, at the breakfast table, he took the milk for his coffee directly from a goat's udder.⁹

The initial printing for the *Mercury*'s first issue was five thousand; a second printing was necessary, then a third. The January 1924 *Mercury* sold more than fifteen thousand copies, far surpassing the most optimistic expectations.¹⁰ By the end of the year, circulation had climbed past forty-two thousand.¹¹ Nathan's resignation

⁵ M. K. Singleton, *H. L. Mencken and the American Mercury Adventure* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1962), pp. 39–40. Dr. Singleton's intelligent, thoroughly documented book offers the most comprehensive treatment of the magazine. For another valuable history of the *Mercury*, see Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 5:3–26. For a briefer, less-documented discussion, see Joseph A. Kamp, "Telling the Truth for Fifty Years," *American Mercury* 110 (Spring 1974):5–14.

⁶ For a partial list of the *Mercury*'s better-known contributors, see Kamp, p. 7.

⁷ Singleton, p. 65.

⁸ See Singleton, chap. 4, "Mencken as Editor," pp. 55–110.

⁹ These "Americana" columns, for February 1924 and July 1925, are cited by Gerald Schwartz, "The West as Gauged by H. L. Mencken's *American Mercury*," *Menckeniana* 84 (Spring 1984):2,3.

¹⁰ Singleton, pp. 52–53.

¹¹ Bachman et al., *Three Years*, p. 8.

as coeditor in 1925 had no noticeable impact. (The men were heading in opposite directions: Nathan's interest remained literature, particularly drama, but Mencken was concerned with the American scene.)¹² By the end of June 1925, circulation had surpassed forty-six thousand.¹³

April 1926 was marked by the uproar over "Hatrack," a chapter from Herbert Asbury's forthcoming book *Up from Methodism*. This episode brought the magazine and its editor even greater notoriety and placed both in the forefront of the battle against censorship. "Hatrack"—the title is taken from an angular prostitute of that name—ridicules evangelicalism, hypocritical religion, and the prurience of small-town life. The Reverend J. Frank Chase, secretary of the powerful Watch and Ward Society in Boston, found "Hatrack" immoral, and a magazine peddler on Harvard Square was arrested for selling the issue in question. Mencken went to Boston to challenge the ruling, sold Chase a copy of the magazine, and was promptly arrested. Mencken was tried the next day and acquitted the following one. The victory cost over twenty thousand dollars in lost revenues and legal fees and a substantial loss of advertising, but the *Mercury* had taken a stand for freedom of speech, a cause that Mencken championed above all others.¹⁴ At the end of 1926, Walter Lippmann called Mencken "the most powerful influence on this whole generation of educated people."¹⁵

¹² As of the August 1925 issue, Nathan was no longer listed as coeditor. He continued to write "Clinical Notes" and "The Theatre" until 1930, when he sold his stock in the magazine to Mencken and Knopf (Singleton, pp. 58–59; and Alfred A. Knopf, "H. L. Mencken, George Jean Nathan, and the *American Mercury* Adventure," pp. 1–5).

¹³ Singleton, p. 64.

¹⁴ The Hatrack episode is covered, in various degrees of detail, in nearly all the books devoted to Mencken. Moreover, it has been the subject of numerous journal articles. In 1937, Mencken donated to Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library an eight-volume history of the case. Mencken's record has been published, without his annotations: Carl Bode, ed., *The Editor, the Bluenose, and the Prostitute: H. L. Mencken's History of the "Hatrack" Censorship Case* (Boulder, Colo.: Roberts Rinehart, 1988).

¹⁵ Walter Lippmann, "H. L. Mencken," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 11 December 1926, pp. 413–14.

Circulation approached eighty thousand in 1927 and peaked at eighty-four thousand in early 1928.¹⁶ It has been argued repeatedly that the stock-market crash and the resulting depression began the *Mercury*'s decline. Certainly, they proved to be major factors. Mencken's decision not to take the depression seriously hurt the magazine's credibility. Moreover, his iconoclasm proved less agreeable to the empty stomachs of the depression years. But circulation figures show that the magazine's popularity had begun to ebb prior to the crash in October 1929.¹⁷ Mencken's satire, it appears, had run its course. It had been so insistent, and in the end so successful, that there was less real need for it. Circulation continued to decline during the early years of the depression. A Jeffersonian liberal, Mencken defended laissez-faire capitalism and attacked proletarian literature. He was bitterly derided by the Left. In 1932, some of Mencken's old friends turned on him. November of that year saw the publication of the first issue of the *American Spectator*, edited by Nathan, Dreiser, Ernest Boyd (an Irish critic who had written a book about Mencken in 1925), James Branch Cabell, and Eugene O'Neill. Some of the *American Spectator*'s features were outright imitations of those in the *Mercury*.¹⁸

Mencken resigned as editor of the *Mercury* in December 1933, and his departure precipitated what Marvin Singleton has called "the erratic downward course of the monthly."¹⁹ Henry Hazlitt, formerly of the *Nation*, edited four issues. When he was replaced by Charles Angoff, previously Mencken's assistant, the magazine moved to the Left. Knopf sold the magazine in December 1934—for only twenty-five thousand dollars—to Paul Palmer, formerly of the Baltimore *Sunpapers*.²⁰ Never again

¹⁶ Singleton, p. 156.

¹⁷ Singleton, p. 214.

¹⁸ Singleton, p. 227, n. 50. Later, even Herbert Asbury wrote for the *American Spectator*. Nathan and Dreiser had a falling-out over editorial policy, and the *American Spectator* folded in 1937. Mencken never took this magazine seriously.

¹⁹ Singleton, p. 3.

²⁰ Singleton's book carries the history of the *Mercury* up to 1962 (pp. 238–41). Mott's history of the magazine was written in 1960, but his documentation goes up to 1966 (p. 26, footnote). Kamp's article takes the magazine up to 1974.

would the *Mercury* evidence the quality or stability that it had shown under Knopf.

In October 1936, the magazine was reduced to digest size, and the price was cut from fifty to thirty-five cents. Three years later, Palmer sold the magazine to Lawrence E. Spivak, a Harvard graduate who had become the magazine's business manager in 1933. Some old faces reappeared. In 1940, Nathan returned to his column on the theater. Angoff contributed to "The Library" and served as both literary editor and managing editor, and Mencken wrote three pieces during 1939 and 1941.²¹ Under Spivak, the *Mercury* lacked the vitality that it had shown under Mencken. In 1946, the magazine merged with *Common Sense*. By December 1950, Spivak was reportedly losing forty thousand dollars an issue, and he sold the *Mercury* to Clendenin J. Ryan, the wealthy son of Thomas Fortune Ryan.²² Ryan published three issues under the title the *New American Mercury* and sold the magazine to William Bradford Huie in February 1951. In the issue of October 1951, Huie placed the legend "Founded by Henry L. Mencken" beneath the table of contents.²³ The magazine reprinted several of Mencken's articles and ran a story by Herbert Asbury about the Hatrack affair. In August 1952, Huie sold the *Mercury* to J. Russell Maguire, a wealthy oilman and munitions manufacturer.

During Maguire's eight years, the *Mercury* ran more articles (much shorter ones) per issue and took a pronounced step to the Right. J. Edgar Hoover wrote for the magazine, as did Billy Graham, whose portrait graced the cover in January 1957. The *Mercury* defended Senator Joseph McCarthy and the doctrine of states' rights and attacked, among other things, the graduated income tax, the NAACP, the United Nations, NATO, the ACLU, and Zionism. In fact, for the remainder of its days the

Mercury was engaged in a bitter battle with the Anti-Defamation League over charges of anti-Semitism.

In January 1961, Maguire sold the *Mercury* to the Defenders of the Christian Faith, Inc., and the editorial offices were moved to Oklahoma City. Whereas earlier the magazine had been shaped by Mencken's skepticism, now it printed moral lectures and ran a number of reprints from fundamentalist periodicals. There was even an advertisement for recordings of Billy Sunday's sermons. Issues were missed now, and the magazine contained only sixty-four pages. In 1963, the Legion for the Survival of Freedom, Inc., bought the magazine and moved its offices to Texas. A religious editor was added to the staff. The magazine, which sometimes appeared late, attacked John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. In April 1963, the *Mercury* became a quarterly. In June 1966, the magazine announced an agreement with the *Washington Observer*, a four-page, semi-monthly publication: the periodicals had to be subscribed to concurrently.²⁴ At the same time, the *Mercury* announced a merger with *Western Destiny*, a monthly. The *Mercury* also inherited *Northern World*, *Folk*, and *Right*, publications that *Western Destiny* had succeeded.

Beginning with the winter 1966 issue, editorial offices were moved to Torrance, California. A year later, the *Mercury*'s circulation was under seven thousand.²⁵ The magazine lambasted the Jews and carried articles on eugenics.²⁶ Under Mencken, the *Mercury* had discussed many aspects of black culture and had published the writing of George Schuyler, James Weldon John-

²¹ This arrangement lasted until 15 September 1976. Thereafter, the *Washington Observer* was bound inside the *American Mercury* as a separate section.

²² "Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation," *American Mercury* 103 (Winter 1967):37.

²³ For example, see Bela Hubbard, Ph.D., "Human Monogrelization: A Few Facts About Miscegenation," *American Mercury* 107 (Summer 1971):43-44; Elmer Pendell, Ph.D., "A Eugenic Marriage Law," *American Mercury* 103 (Spring 1967):39-41; and "In the *Mercury*'s Opinion: Save a Few Whites for Posterity," *American Mercury* 110 (Fall 1974):4.

²¹ With some interruptions, Nathan continued "The Theatre" column until 1951.

²² Kamp, p. 8.

²³ This legend remained until June 1953.

son, Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter White, and Countee Cullen.²⁷ In 1967, the *Mercury* denounced racial integration and went so far as to state: "Negroes have never, at any time or place in the entire history of the world, created or maintained a culture above that of the stone age" (103:3–5).

With the spring 1974 issue, the *Mercury* celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The magazine drew upon its illustrious past in an effort to enhance its popularity. The lead editorial, "If Mencken Would Return . . .," announced righteously, and wrongly, that Mencken "would clearly approve of the lonely course [the] *Mercury* has taken since his departure." The editorial spoke confidently of the magazine moving "into its second half-century" and continuing "in [Mencken's] footsteps" (110:3–4). It was a very short half-century, and the magazine's course was not one that Mencken had plotted. In 1976, the *Mercury* published Austin J. App's "H. L. Mencken, Most Influential German-American Author." Marred by several factual errors, the piece lamented that Mencken's insistence upon freedom of speech had unintentionally "furnished ammunition to the proponents of pornography."²⁸ The *Mercury* ran articles attacking black studies, the supposedly pernicious influence of modern art in general and Picasso's paintings in particular, and attempts by homosexuals to gain equality under the

law. One editorial questioned the existence of the Holocaust and declared that "Adolph Hitler had embarked upon the greatest task of any man in history . . . the creation of a new culture on the ruins of the old" (114:3–4).

In the fall 1979 issue, the editor announced a change in ownership and bravely spoke of returning to monthly publication with a magazine twice as long as the present one.²⁹ With the winter issue, editorial offices were moved to Houston. The next year, 1980, marked the centennial of Mencken's birth, and the spring issue was dedicated to his memory. Besides reprinting one of Mencken's articles and carrying a centennial graphic, the *Mercury* ran a lead editorial about Mencken that eulogized an earlier, simpler time when "the virus of social, racial and sexual equality did not find fertile soil in the minds of most Americans" (116:3–4). This issue ended with a special supplement soliciting contributions so that computers could index biographical information about America's fifteen thousand most dangerous political activists. This plea marked the magazine's lugubrious end. With no notice of cessation, the *Mercury* shut down after publishing one issue in its fifty-seventh year.³⁰

Few American periodicals have changed as drastically as the *Mercury* did. At its best, during the early years under Mencken, the magazine stood at the forefront of American culture by examining this coun-

²⁷ For the most complete study of Mencken's response to black writers, see Charles Scruggs, *The Sage in Harlem: H. L. Mencken and the Black Writers of the 1920s* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984). For the *Mercury's* response to and publication of black writers, see Fenwick Anderson, "Black Perspectives in Mencken's *Mercury*," *Menckeniana* 70 (Summer 1979):2–6.

²⁸ Austin J. App, Ph.D., "H. L. Mencken, Most Influential German-American Author," *American Mercury* 112 (Summer 1976):50–54. Reprinted under the same title in the *American Mercury* 116 (September 1980):50–54. Mencken's house at 1524 Hollins Street is one of the most famous addresses in American literary history, yet App has Mencken living on Hollins Street. Moreover, App has Mencken living here his whole life. Actually, during the five years of his marriage (1930–1935), Mencken lived at 704 Cathedral Street. Mencken's younger brother August was an engineer, yet App has him working in a cigar factory.

²⁹ As best as I can tell, the American Mercury Patrons, Inc., published only the final issue of the magazine.

³⁰ Because of the absence of a notice of cessation, I have gone to considerable lengths to verify that the magazine indeed folded at this time. I have been informed by the Legion for the Survival of Freedom that the *Mercury* ceased publication in 1980 (letter from Tom Marcellus, director, 7 November 1990). I have contacted various libraries across America, and none holds an issue subsequent to that of spring 1980. Finally, I have found no evidence that the *Mercury* merged with another periodical.

I would like to acknowledge here the kind assistance provided by Eleanor Swidan and Robert Burke of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. Both were extraordinarily generous with their time and effort. Moreover, I am grateful for the help offered by Hubert Humphreys, a historian in Shreveport, Louisiana, and by Stephen Hussman, the archivist at the Noel Library, Louisiana State University–Shreveport.

try with an enlightened skepticism. At its worst, the magazine drifted into the foul backwaters of fear and intolerance. But the *Mercury*'s demise should not detract from its achievements. Because of its uncompromising stand against censorship, its pos-

itive influence upon other American magazines, the cogency of its satire, and the opportunities that it offered to a variety of writers, the *Mercury* succeeded, at least for a while, in fulfilling the high expectations that Mencken held for it in 1923.



Mencken and the Feds

BY SHAWN CUNNINGHAM

In an autobiographical note from the 1940s, H. L. Mencken wrote: "There has never been an occasion when the agents of the United States showed any awareness of the individual citizen H. L. Mencken, that they did not try to do me in. Insofar as my personal relation with it offers any evidence, the government I live under is devoted exclusively to extortion and oppression."

He continued: "Twice in my lifetime, I have been silenced altogether by the fevers of wartime, at least so far as the discussion of public matters was concerned. I got through World War I by avoiding all mention of it in the *Smart Set* and my books: It was not until 1926 that I won back any genuine measure of free speech."

As Menckenians, we have read his accounts of the war in his letters and in his articles. We have read the analysis of critics and scholars who have written that more than Hemingway or Dos Passos or Cummings, Mencken was a writer marked by war. As a German-American, the great conflict reinforced his sense of himself as an outsider at odds with official American values.

We know all of this, but we also know that Mencken was given to gross overstatement in his letters. In the backs of our minds we must ask ourselves: "How bad were things for Germans in America and

especially how bad were they for this very visible German-American?

To find this out, I made a request under the "Freedom of Information Act" for all information that the United States had collected on "the individual citizen H. L. Mencken." While the idea was logical, the vehicle for completing it was not. Nor was it very neat.

The federal government is made up of many agencies, each with many bureaus, offices and branches spread around many locations. This alone can make information difficult to find. It is possible for a file to exist in a branch office of the FBI but not in the central records. It is also possible for information about one individual contained in another individual's file to slip by a cataloger and remain undiscovered by researchers.

In addition, "The Freedom of Information Act" provides the government with several ways to exempt materials from the public view, including not only the protection of actual sources, but also the protection of *methods* of information gathering.

This is a rather roundabout way of saying that I do not believe that I possess the definitive federal government file on Henry Mencken, nor do I expect that anyone ever will. Certainly, we will add to this, but I doubt that every reference will be found. The following is a review of highlights of this collection.